

The Art of the Feast

Decoration of Native American Food-Related Utensils

The Mashantucket Pequot Museum and Research Center, located on the Mashantucket Pequot tribal reservation in Ledyard, Connecticut, recently opened its first staff-generated exhibit entitled *Gifts of the Forest: Native Traditions in Wood and Bark*, which was on display from October 5, 2000, through March 4, 2001, and then will travel nationally. *Gifts of the Forest* showcases over 100 different works from bowls and spoons to birchbark canoes and bows made by Native American artists throughout the eastern portion of North America from the 17th century to the present day. The exhibit presents Native American art from a more holistic perspective than has typically been the case with similar exhibits. Rather than highlight a single category of artwork, *Gifts of the Forest* adopts as its focal point the significant relationship that links Native people in the eastern United States and trees, a primary aspect of their natural environment. The exhibit is supported with extensive programming that emphasized related themes through native story tellers, artists demonstrations, lectures, and a special exhibit-related dinner.

Effigy bowl, 19th century, north-eastern woodlands. Photo courtesy Mashantucket Pequot Museum and Research Center.



For thousands of years, Native people in the eastern woodlands have been using wood and bark for housing, medicine, food, dyes, utensils, tools, and transportation. The trees that provide these materials play a prominent role in spiritual beliefs throughout the area, from the Abenaki and Leni-Lenape creation to the Iroquois Great Tree of Peace. The themes of strength, protection, thanksgiving, creation, and renewal associated with the great forests of the eastern woodlands are as important today as they were in the distant past and continue to inspire contemporary artists.

Many of the exhibited pieces were intended to be used in the preparation and consumption of food. Wood and bark were used extensively throughout the eastern woodlands to manufacture spoons, bowls, dishes, and food storage containers. Even the fibrous inner bark of some trees such as cedar and basswood was used to weave bags for storing wild rice and other dried foods. In fact, wood was the preferred medium for serving and consuming food, being mentioned in some of the earliest European accounts as well as having been discovered archeologically on numerous early historic sites. Individuals usually possessed their own wooden bowl and spoon and were expected to provide these at important feasts and ceremonies where food was served from larger, communal wooden vessels. Highly decorated wooden spoons, bowls, and stirring paddles are well represented in the material culture of eastern woodland societies and are an important reflection on cultural values associated with food and eating.

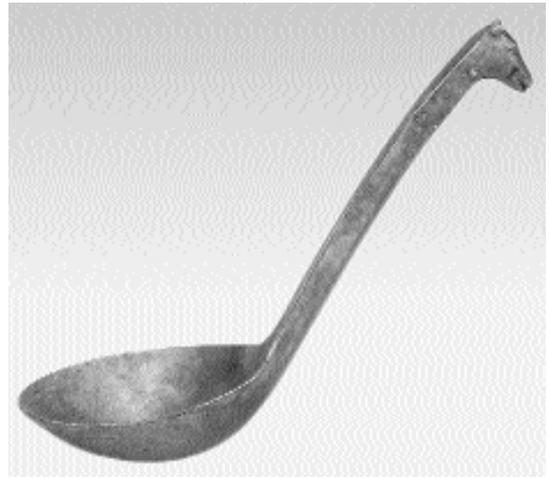
Gifts of the Forest focuses the visitor's attention on the complex cultural-social-aesthetic relationship that exists between artist, culture, and object as reflected by the design and decoration of these wood and bark utensils. Nowhere is this relationship clearer than in the creation of spoons, ladles, and bowls. These objects were

Bear effigy ladle, 19th century, northeastern woodlands. Photo courtesy Mashantucket Pequot Museum and Research Center.

originally made to be utilized for eating-related activities, not to be viewed solely as works of art, and their decoration is meant as a complement to the integrity of the whole piece. This concept of combining art and utility is found throughout the eastern woodlands and is different from western European traditions which often separate fine art from “craft” or decorative arts. Native people view art as inseparable from the rest of human endeavor. Art, spirituality, and utility are one and the same. This concept extends to the way in which Native people interact with the world around them and how they re-interpret that relationship in their art.

Native artists created wood and bark spoons, bowls, and ladles with a variety of two and three dimensional forms. Ultimately, all of these items were limited in their basic form by their intended function. However, it is through the decoration of these objects that the artist expresses the connection between artistic vision and social or spiritual life. This relationship is illustrated in two fundamental ways, realistic and abstract. The first and most recognizable can be termed “realistic essentialism” where the artist renders naturalistic images of people, plants, animals, and spirit beings. On wooden utensils, these are often carved in the round, are characterized as effigies, and are typically carved to offer the viewer an impression or essence of various animals, birds, people, and/or spirit beings. Details of hair, fur, feathers, and facial expression are often simplified in order to convey a more powerful and symbolic image. The artist carves the effigy as if it were emerging from the handle of a spoon or ladle or rising above the rim of a bowl. The effect is one of quiet power and balance between the formal and functional aspects that create a sense of immediacy between the viewer and the object.

Effigies are never carved solely for decorative purposes. On the contrary, they represent personal or clan totems and have important spiritual symbolism. For instance, many of the human effigies illustrate the main actions of participants in important feasts and ceremonies either engaged in eating, drinking, or other specialized activities. In essence, these carvings mirror the thoughts and actions of the user creating a double image of the feast for all the participants to view. At the same time, they honor and invoke the personification of the spiritual powers that are represented, thereby uniting the spiritual, functional, and aesthetic in a single object.



The second decorative form can be termed “abstract representation,” which includes all manner of less recognizable depictions including carved and/or engraved linear and geometric designs. These designs are no less symbolic for their abstraction, representing animal tracks, natural phenomenon, spirit beings, and medicinal plants. Often these abstract representations are arranged to help fill and elaborate the negative space created by the more recognizable naturalistic depictions of people and animals. In this way, they reflect the artist’s concern for balance and harmony between human beings and non-human entities. They help to ground the artwork in a cultural “reality” where people are an integral part of the world around them.

The inspiration for all of the carved designs, particularly effigy figures, derives from two inter-related sources, dreams or visions and community aesthetics. While the specific animal, person, or spirit being depicted originated through a dream or vision, the artist, as a member of a tribal community, draws on shared ideas of representation and symbolism in order to transform the dream image into the physical world and thereby, make it “real.” In this way, designs and effigies carved, engraved, or painted on a variety of different objects could be understood and shared in their essence by all tribal members. The act of eating, especially at communal feasts, involved many layers of participation, from the smell and taste of the food to the visual reminder of clans, ancestors, and sacred ideologies carved into the utensils. The decoration and use of these objects became an important method for transmitting cultural values, histories, and traditions during the turbulent and dangerous centuries of European colonization.

Gifts of the Forest was supported by extensive programming which helped to realize the exhibit's holistic theme. These programs included a number of special events, workshops, and demonstrations. Many of the contemporary artists featured in *Gifts of the Forests* were brought into the gallery to discuss and demonstrate their skills as basket makers and woodcarvers. Exhibit programming also featured traditional native stories of the eastern woodlands.

In addition, a curator-led gallery tour and special dinner complemented the exhibit. The dinner was the first in what has evolved into a very popular series of themed dinners. The *Gifts of the Forest* dinner featured a menu that re-interpreted traditional woodland foods such as, caribou, elk, wild mushrooms, maple syrup, and smoked trout in a modern museum setting. The museum chefs coordinated closely with the curation and research staff to develop a menu which included traditional foods while allowing for creativity in presentation. An important aspect of the dinner was the opportunity for guests to tour

the exhibit with the curator who provided a “behind the scenes” perspective.

Although *Gifts of the Forest* included a wide variety of Native American art derived from wood and bark materials, a significant number of exhibit objects were food-related. The key concept of unifying cultural, social, and aesthetic components from a Native American perspective relates directly to the interpretation of how food was viewed. Meals and feasts were a complete sensory and emotional experience, where the physical act of eating played only a small part. Carved and decorated spoons, bowls, and other vessels were a constant reminder of important cultural values associated with the spiritual forces that surround the community. In order to more fully appreciate Native American objects, it is necessary to understand them in a holistic context that recognizes art as a sociocultural construct. The same can be said for all human action, regardless of time, place, or circumstance.

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Sandra Oliver

A Fine Kettle of Fish

Historically, fish has been a problem food in America. We have serious and persistent objections to eating it, which the fisheries industry has always had to overcome in order to market its supply successfully. Technological advances in both fishing and the production and distribution of fish products developed more quickly during the 19th century than the average consumer's desire to eat it. By 1900, the fishing industry caught a great deal more fish than anyone wanted.

The origins of America's difficulty with fish are both technical and cultural. The technical objections to fish are based on its lightness, perishability, boniness, and the delicacy of its flesh. The cultural conflict arose because fish was often associated with poverty and Roman Catholicism, and that fish (and fishermen) were perceived as undomesticated.

Objections to eating fish seem deeply seated in northern European culture and are probably rationalizations for other deeper fears. Are we troubled, for example, by something that breathes and bleeds as we do, but lives in an element where we cannot? Is a fish too ambiguous a creature, neither one thing nor another? We know fish isn't meat, but as one 19th-century seafarer asked, “What are fish? Are they vegetables or wot?”

The Lightness of Fish

“As a food fish ranks between meat on the one hand and vegetables on the other. It is not so nutritious as the former...and it is thought that a diet in which fish predominates produces deficient vitality,” said Todd Goodeholme. In his *Domestic Cyclopedia* (1885), Goodeholme further cites the authority of Dr. Edward Smith who wrote, “It is not desirable, that fish should be the sole kind of animal food eaten by any nation; and even if milk and eggs be added thereto, the vigor of such people will not be equal to that of flesh-eating nations.”¹

Generations of Europeans ate fish when they fasted. Consuming meat was considered pleasurable and promoted carnality, while fish